

University of Iceland  
School of Humanities  
Department of English

“Ah Choose not tae Choose Life”: The Downsides of  
Heroin Use as Represented in *Trainspotting* by Irvine  
Welsh

B.A Essay

Guðmundur Ásgeir Sveinsson

1401883449

Supervisor: Ingibjörg Ágústsdóttir

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## **Abstract**

*Trainspotting* is famous in the Western world today. Most people who know it connect it with the 1996 Danny Boyle film of the same name. The movie is based on a novel by Irvine Welsh which was first published in 1993. Welsh based the novel on his own drug related experiences from his youth in Scotland. *Trainspotting* revolves around a group of friends that are addicted to heroin. The novel portrays the addicts' turbulent lives and does not paint a pretty picture. The characters often clash with others, whether it is government, police or their families. Mark Renton, the protagonist of *Trainspotting*, and his friends feel like they do not belong in today's society and do everything they can to stay out of it. They are unemployed, have cut their families out of their lives and have no direction in life. The British government has implemented laws and spent a lot of money and effort on campaigns against drugs since early in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In the last few decades the British government has focused on a war against heroin and in doing so described heroin addicts as worthless losers that nobody would want to end up like, the lowest of the low. The British government has implemented laws and run campaigns that aim to marginalize heroin addicts and show that there is no place for them in society. This portrayal of addicts by the government rings true with the characters in *Trainspotting* as they face all the problems that the government preaches against in its anti-heroin campaigns and law makings.

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## 1. Introduction

Addiction is “a pattern of compulsive and destructive drug-taking behaviour” (Nolen-Hoeksema et al. 694). This scholarly definition of addiction fits well with the characters in *Trainspotting* by Irvine Welsh. Published in 1993, this novel is regarded as one of two Scottish cult novels about heroin use, the other being *Cain's Book* by Alexander Trocchi (Ferrebe 9). Welsh's novel takes place in Scotland in the 1980s when heroin was everywhere. It had replaced marijuana as the most common drug that young people were using (Parker et al. 1). There is immense amount of drug use in *Trainspotting*. Every main character in the novel is addicted to something, whether it is heroin, amphetamine, alcohol or violence; their lives revolve around their addiction. Each main character in Irvine Welsh's novel is fighting or giving in to some form of addiction. The junkies that the story is set around live so much for the moment and their lives are very chaotic (McGuire 19). They feel that their addiction is what gives their lives meaning and a purpose.

Since the end of World War II the drug scene in Britain has gone through many changes. Different drugs have been popular during each decade. The mod scene in the 1960s was famous for the use of amphetamine. The hippies in the 1970s smoked a lot of marijuana and in the 1980s heroin was the biggest thing on the British drug scene. All of these drug waves began in a subculture within a minority population of the country (Parker et al. 1). The British government has tried many different approaches in its fight against drug use. The government has implemented laws like the Dangerous Drugs Act in 1967 which limited the number of doctors that were allowed to prescribe cocaine and heroin to patients and gave the police more authority in drug related crimes. Another law that the government passed in order to fight against drug use was the Misuse of Drugs Act in 1971 which had the goal of unifying British laws on drug use that up to this point had been unorganized (Yates 11). The government has also tried running campaigns such as the “Heroin screws you up” campaign, whose main goal was to show how dangerous heroin and heroin users were. The main focus of these campaigns has been to display drug addicts as people who are hopeless, dangerous and more or less the lowest of the low (Parker 6). *Trainspotting* takes place in the time when the British government was campaigning strongly against the heroin use. The main characters in *Trainspotting* show much of the same characteristics as those attributed to drug addicts by the British government in its fight against drug use.

## 2. Background

### 2.1 Irvine Welsh

Irvine Welsh was born in Leith in Scotland in 1958. As a young boy he moved to Muirhouse in Edinburgh. When he was 20 years old he moved to London and became fascinated with the punk music scene that was sweeping the nation (Schoene viii). In London he drank heavily and also used amphetamine and heroin for a brief period of time. When he was arrested for a series of small crimes he decided to get his act together (Morace “*Trainspotting*” 9). He moved back home to Edinburgh in the late 1980s and was not happy with what he saw upon his return. Some of his old friends were addicted to heroin, others were infected with AIDS and some were dead (Morace, “Irvine Welsh: Parochialism, Pornography and Globalisation” 229).

The worsened living conditions that Welsh returned to were partly the government’s fault. The government refused to provide clean needles through a clean needles program and by doing so had a hand in increasing the number of AIDS patients. AIDS spread through the drug addicts’ community due to the addicts’ sharing of needles with each other. The government believed that providing clean needles would be seen as a soft approach to drug use (Kelly 37). Welsh himself noted that his old neighbourhood of Muirhouse had changed much for the worse since he left. He said that before he left most people had some work to provide for themselves and their families. He also noted that people had had a chance to move on to bigger things. When he returned, however, he found that his old home had become a kind of a ghetto and people there had no chance of doing something with their lives (Kelly 1).

The environment that Welsh returned to in Muirhouse in Edinburgh was essential in forming his writing style. Welsh wanted to display the diversity of Scotland. By using fragmented dialects showing the differences between classes Welsh was able to celebrate the pluralism of Scotland. Welsh does not believe that Scotland has one coherent identity (Carruthers and McIlvanney 11). In an interview, he stated that his writing style in *Trainspotting*, that is, the way he uses phonetic spelling, was even difficult for some Scottish people to understand because there are many different dialects in the different subcultures of Scotland (O’Shea and Shapiro 1). Welsh says that his early books are about a shift in drug culture in Britain in the 1980s. He says that during that time period people’s drugs of choice went from legal drugs, such as alcohol and tobacco, towards illegal ones like heroin (Kelly 9).

One of Welsh’s accomplishments in *Trainspotting* is the fact that he does not try to make his subject prettier than it is. This blunt approach to writing by Welsh has most likely cost him some awards. *Trainspotting* was nominated for the Booker Prize in 1993 but did not

make the shortlist for the award for a strange reason. The judging panel consisted of three men and two women, the women did not want *Trainspotting* on the shortlist because its text offended them and the three men in the jury reportedly did not want to object to the women (Morace “*Trainspotting*” 11). Welsh’s writing style is sometimes so crude that he shocks his readers. However, he still manages to show his readers that the characters in his novels run daily lives that are parallel to the readers’ own lives. Furthermore, Welsh is able to portray the characters’ self-destructive behaviour in a light that shows it as means of resistance to the government and to society as a whole (Schoene 3). This helps the reader identify with the characters in *Trainspotting* and to see them as real people but not just as characters in a book.

## **2.2 British drug culture**

British drug culture has evolved a lot through the twentieth century. In the 1920s there was a notable increase of British cocaine and opium addicts. This was linked to the young people’s interest in trying new things. Jazz was coming on to the scene as well as big changes in clothing and language. The British government reacted to this by implementing the so-called New British System. That system introduced the change that drug addiction was an illness and therefore drugs had to be prescribed by doctors. This action by the government was successful in reducing the number of British drug addicts. The Great Depression then increased the New British System’s effect because it caused drugs to be too expensive for a big part of the public in the 1930s (Yates 3).

In the late 1950s and early 1960s there was a big increase in heroin and cocaine addicts in England. This was mostly because of a group of doctors in London who were prescribing big and multiple doses of heroin and cocaine to their patients. This gathered attention through newspaper articles about the drug scene in London and forced the government into action. The government implemented the Dangerous Drugs Act (DDA) in 1967 which required doctors in England to have a license from the Home Office in order to prescribe heroin or cocaine to patients. The government only focused on the drug scene in England. The Dangerous Drugs Act was not implemented in Scotland, Wales or Northern Ireland because the government did not see a drug problem in those parts of the UK (Yates 7).

The purpose of the DDA was to decrease the number of heroin and cocaine addicts. This goal was not reached. The number of addicts, especially under the age of 30, continued to increase and a black market with heroin and cocaine was established (Yates 9). The outbreak of punk in the mid-1970s only increased the heroin problem. One of the goals of the punk scene was to shock people. In the beginning of the punk scene many started to sniff glue

because it was the most visible and distasteful drug that they could use. Heroin, due to its way of intake and the visual effect it has on its users, fits well in the category of drugs that cause shock with the public so it became popular among punks in the late 1970s (Yates 10).

With technological advances and a more liberal government and media drugs have become more visible in the last few decades. This and the fact that drugs are illegal in society today is a part of the reason why they are so popular in everyday life. Many drugs provide a temporary break from real life and that break is appealing to a large group of people (South 3). Drugs are very noticeable in today's society. They occur and are referred to frequently in movies, music and other media. This means that drugs are a part of everyone's lives, albeit a small one in many cases (South 7). People who may not know anyone who has been a drug addict have access to TV shows, music and plays about doing drugs and this is often shown in a more positive light than it warrants.

### **2.3 The government's battle against heroin**

The de-industrialization in Britain in the 1980s caused a lot of problems. Many students who finished school in the early and mid-1980s could not find work. This had not been a problem in Britain since World War II. The revolution of the free market caused by Margaret Thatcher's right wing government caused a lot of unskilled youth and their parents to lose their jobs (Buchanan & Young 411). The unemployment rate was rising, especially among young people and in that time period about 100 thousand young people in Britain became heroin addicts. Most of them came from poor families, were unemployed and ignored by the government (Parker 5). This rise in the number of heroin addicts caused many different problems. As heroin is most often taken through injection it can cause many diseases such as liver disease, pneumonia, hepatitis and HIV. These diseases as well as the risk of overdosing add up to the fact that heroin users are twelve times more likely to die than the average citizen (Fox et al. 1-2).

This increase in heroin addicts prompted the government into action. Up to this point the government had tried to approach drugs as a medical problem but a shift in tone was needed:

I would only say, Sir Edward, that certainly I wish you and your Committee well in your studies, and I am here to assist you in any way that I can, because it is a cardinal belief of the Government at the moment, about this problem, that whereas it was the view of the government years ago that the best way to keep the drugs problem under



control was to seek to say in every public utterance that there was not a drugs problem, that is no longer an acceptable basis on which to proceed and has not been for some time (qtd. in Stimson 35).

This speech by David Mellor, Junior Home Office Minister, before the House of Commons Home Affairs Committee in 1986 was a sign of things to come. The US government had begun its war on drugs in the presidency of Richard Nixon and when Ronald Reagan took over the White House the US government launched a campaign called “Just Say No”. Margaret Thatcher had a good relationship with Reagan and his government and followed his example in the mid-1980s and introduced a public health campaign called “Heroin screws you up”. The campaign was the work of Sammy Harari who was the director of the advertisement agency Yellowstone (“Gloves off in anti-injecting campaign”). The campaign’s main goal was to make everyone afraid of heroin. The campaign did not focus on heroin as society’s problem but rather focused on the individual’s right and need to say no to drugs, and heroin in particular (Buchanan and Young 412). The campaign showed the regular heroin user as a homeless, hopeless person. Furthermore, the campaign portrayed the heroin addict as someone who was dangerous, someone who would steal from you and even infect you with diseases and cause you to die (Parker 6). The main characters in *Trainspotting* are young men that are unemployed and have nothing in their lives that they treasure apart from drugs. They fit well with the stereotype that the government presented in its portrayal of heroin addicts in the mid and late 1980s.

The British government has changed its tone quite a bit since their release of the “Heroin screws you up” campaign in 1985. In 1987 the government started to focus on the drug users themselves who had not been a target group in the “Heroin screws you up” campaign. The government started two campaigns in 1987. One of these was called “Smack isn’t worth it” and the other one was called “Don’t inject yourself with AIDS”. John Moore, the Secretary of State for the Social services described the message of the two campaigns with the following statement:

Firstly, young people who might be tempted to use drugs. To them we say – don’t, it’s not worth it. Secondly, existing drug users who might be tempted to inject. To them we say if you don’t inject drugs you won’t inject AIDS. Thirdly, existing drug injectors. To them we say if you can’t stop, never share injecting equipment (Druglink 4).

These words are supposed to create fear among drug users and Moore himself has agreed to this, saying that the government has to be powerful in its message to drug addicts who are putting their life in danger (Druglink 4).

The environment that these campaigns were released in rings true with the setting in *Trainspotting* as it is set in about the same time period. The British government has since brought about changes in its stance on clean needles programs and has opened up facilities around the country where addicts can access clean needles and drop off their used ones. This was an action by the government that aimed at slowing down the spread of AIDS. Methadone treatments have also been a popular way to help addicts off heroin (Sheridan 145). These changes do not change the fact, however, that addicts are looked down upon in British society as weak-willed people that are lower in the social ladder than the general public.

### **3. *Trainspotting*: The worst kind of consumer society**

Drug addicts have a different consumption pattern from the general public. Most people have a job in order to feed themselves and their families as well as to buy what they desire. This means that consumption is in a way what people's lives are structured around. Some of the things people spend money on are things that they themselves do not really want but they buy them because they are concerned with what other people think about what they buy (Ryan et al. 433). Drug addicts, however, live by a different consumption pattern. Each purchase they make serves their need for drugs. While the regular consumer society creates unity and competition between consumers the drug community's consumerism only evokes happiness between addicts when they have acquired drugs and anger and despair when they are not able to get drugs (Ryan et al. 436-437).

The characters in *Trainspotting* can be divided into two distinctive tribes. The first is the tribe of the addicts and the second is the tribe of all the other characters that are members of the general public (Ryan et al. 435). In the film version of *Trainspotting* Renton calls the second tribe of people the human tribe (Boyle 1996). This remark by Renton strengthens his message that he and his associates do not fit into society. *Trainspotting* depicts a time in the late 1980s where an industrial past has given way to a society that relies heavily on mass consumerism. The fact is that the junkies in *Trainspotting* as well as junkies in general are, in a way, just like all consumers (McGuire 21). Renton describes his view on the consumer society in *Trainspotting*:

Choose life. Choose mortgage payments; choose washing machines; choose cars; choose sitting oan a couch watching mind-numbing and spirit-crushing game shows; stuffing junk food intae yir mooth. Choose rotting away, pishing and shiteing yersel in a home, a total fuckin embarrassment tae the selfish, fucked-up brats ye've produced. Choose life (Welsh 237).

Renton does not want to take part in the consumer society that the majority of the public takes part in. Instead, he chooses to do drugs and claim benefits from the government.

In the Western world today the public thrives on the freedom of choosing what to spend its money on. The modern man gets satisfaction from buying something new, no matter what it is. However, the satisfaction gained from buying something new does not last long and in that way it is similar to the feeling that the heroin addict experiences because each purchase and dose of heroin only serves as a temporary satisfaction. Before long, just like all

consumers, the heroin addicts have to buy more to fulfil their needs (McGuire 21-22). When Mark Renton, the protagonist of *Trainspotting*, is clean for a while he becomes a real estate agent in London and is experiencing some economic success which in a way is comparable to drug addiction because people never seem to get enough of drugs and success (Schoene 69). The fact that Renton and the rest of the characters in *Trainspotting* believe themselves to be escaping from what is, in their opinion, a horrible consumer society, is ironic because by giving in to their need for drugs they are participating in a cycle of mass consumerism themselves. Instead of taking part in the regular consumer society that is supported and sanctioned by the government, Renton and his friends are supporting a worse, unregulated consumer society. The fact that drug addicts are not successful in their mission to escape from consumerism supports the government's message that drugs are not the right way to escape from today's society.

Of the two above-mentioned types of consumerism, the one supported by the government is healthier and safer. Nevertheless, conventional consumerism can lead down some dark paths such as alcoholism, food addiction, gambling addiction and many other problems that are linked to today's legal part of society. People can get lost in their spending on clothes, leisure activities and some completely unnecessary things, but the alternative consumerism is much worse. Many drug addicts are stuck in a cycle of having to commit fraud to get governmental benefits or else steal in order to get to money to buy drugs. Also, drug addicts are a burden on their community in many ways. First of all, they cost the government a lot of money because of the benefits they receive. Secondly, they often commit crimes which then cost the government a lot of money to solve and then to prosecute addicts who then do not have any money to pay in damages. Thirdly, the addicts' health is often bad and they need medical care that they do not have the money to pay for and are therefore dependant on the government for support (Brown 20-21).

#### 4. Drug use in *Trainspotting*

“Oan the other hand, ah’d be gitting sick tae before long, and if that cunt went n scored he’d haud oot oan us” (Welsh 3). This quote from the very first page of *Trainspotting* is accurate when describing the state of mind of the junkies in the novel. Mark Renton, the story’s protagonist, does not want Sick Boy to go on his own to buy drugs because he thinks Sick Boy would not share them with him. In the drug business there are no friends, only associates (Welsh 7). This notion proves to be true throughout the story because although the main characters spend a lot of time together and act like friends they always put themselves as individuals in front of anyone else. The clearest example of this is when baby Dawn dies and her mother Lesley is beside herself with grief and demands a dose of heroin. Renton pulls out a spoon and a lighter and starts to cook up a dose and says to himself “Lesley comes first, eftir me. That goes without saying.” (Welsh 72).

In *Trainspotting*, heroin addiction is depicted as a way of life which is anti-social and all consuming. The junkies, through their addiction, are stuck in a vicious cycle of behaviour that will eventually destroy them (McGuire 22-23). Berthold Schoene holds the view that:

It definitely proves harmful to Welsh’s protagonists who, throughout the novel, insist on walking a very fine line between mastering the drug and succumbing to it, that is, between asserting their masculinity by proving themselves capable of managing heroin and yielding to the abjectly emasculating experience of drug-induced debilitation, disease and death (Schoene 70).

The characters in *Trainspotting* are unable to form real relationships, hold a steady job or stay connected to their families because they are completely controlled by and dependent on heroin (McGuire 20-21). The characters in *Trainspotting* are unable to sort out their priorities. They visit their drug dealer before they visit their parents, they understand that life is short but still want to spend their lives doing drugs in misery (Welsh 237). This grim portrayal of drug use in *Trainspotting* fits well with the descriptions of the British government’s campaigns relating to the circumstances of drug addicts. Most of the characters in *Trainspotting* are hopeless addicts that can never quit drugs for good, some of the characters are violent and some are infected with AIDS.

#### 4.1 Mark Renton

Mark Renton is in his twenties and has very little going for him. At one point he studied at a university for a year but gave that up due to his addiction. Unlike the other characters in *Trainspotting*, Renton is smart and does not seem like the type of person that does drugs. His contact with his family is minimal due to his addiction. His heroin addiction takes up a lot of his time and he does not want to involve his family in his life. When his mother comes to visit him and knocks on the door he cooks up a hit of heroin instead of answering the door (Welsh 73). He does feel bad for his parents that he is their son. He describes himself as unattractive, he has bad skin and is very often sweaty and smells bad. He is manipulating the system in order to get unemployment benefits from the government without seeking out work and is very anti-establishment in spirit. His unemployment, physical appearance and his isolation from his family make him a prime example of someone representing the government's anti-heroin agenda (The Museum of Drugs).

At the start of *Trainspotting* Renton describes the junkie's mindset when it comes to drugs. Junkies are not friends with each other, they are just associates (Welsh 7). The recreational drug user always wants to do drugs in partnership with other people while the real junkie does not care about anyone except for him or herself (Welsh 8). The only thing that unifies junkies is their joint happiness when they have all been able to get drugs. Renton knows what consequences heroin use can have. He talks about heroin as "the life-giving and life-taking elixir" (Welsh 12). Even so the risk seems to be worth it to him when he injects himself because he says "Take yir best orgasm, multiply the feeling by twenty, and you're still fuckin miles off the pace" (Welsh 12).

Although Renton talks so positively about the highs of heroin use he still seems to want to quit drugs. At one point he is buying drugs and the dealer tells Renton that the heroin is: "pure as the driven snow" (Welsh 14). Renton notes that this means that the heroin is not mixed with something that is overly toxic (Welsh 14). Renton knows that what he is injecting is not safe but he does it anyway without knowing what he is really injecting himself with. He understands that the heroin is not pure but injects himself with it anyway. He tells the reader that he has taken one last hit of heroin to be able to do all the preparations for his withdrawal. He meticulously prepares a motel room with the essentials he will need when his withdrawal gets severe. He provides himself with a television set, cans of soup, melted ice-cream and buckets for urine, faeces and vomit. The most important thing to aid Renton's withdrawal is a bottle of valium pills that he stole from his mother (Welsh 18-19). This is not enough for Renton who says that the only thing he can move for is heroin and claims that he is sick and

his drug dealer is his healer (Welsh 20-21). Renton at this point is a hopeless addict that cannot clean up his act although he seems to want to do it. In the case of Renton the government's portrayal of addicts as people who are weak-willed and destined to lose control of their lives is accurate (The Museum of Drugs).

Renton holds a pessimistic view when it comes to the meaning of life. In his view "we live a short, disappointing life; and then we die. We fill up oor lives wi shite, things like careers and relationships tae delude oorsels that it isnae aw totally pointless" (Welsh 116). He links this view on life with his view on heroin saying that it is the only honest drug, the reason being that if you take heroin when you feel good it makes you feel invincible but if you take heroin when you are feeling bad the heroin intensifies the bad feelings that you already have (Welsh 116). This view that Renton has on heroin, that it does not change the way you feel but only intensifies it is in accordance with the message of the government's anti-drug battle. This is because the government's message is that if you are feeling bad then drugs are not a solution (The Museum of Drugs). By using Renton's reasoning it can be determined that if you feel bad when you do drugs you will only feel worse once you have done drugs.

A couple of times throughout *Trainspotting* Renton is trying to get off heroin or is off it completely. Early in the novel he goes to a drug dealer to buy some heroin but the dealer only has opium which he tells Renton will help him with the withdrawal. This leads to one of Renton's lowest points in the story where he finds himself in a terribly desperate state in a public bathroom. Afterwards he says to himself that it is time for himself to clean up his act (Brown 325). These empty words that Renton speaks to himself are similar to the "Heroin screws you up" campaign's TV advertisement where a heroin addict states to his girlfriend that he can quit heroin when he wants to ("Heroin Screws You Up"). The similarity being that Renton, just like the addict in the advertisement, never really quits heroin when he intends to or thinks he can do it.

At another point in *Trainspotting* Renton is off heroin and uses amphetamine instead. He notes that there is a problem when he is not using heroin because then he is using all kinds of other drugs and does not know where they come from. When he is on heroin, Renton says, there is no room for other drugs (Welsh 168). Renton continues to realize how life is different when he is on or off heroin. Things like sex and the winning or losing streak of his favourite football team mean nothing to him when he is using heroin but when he is off it those things matter to him (Welsh 191). This revelation by Renton is something that the government was preaching in its anti-drug campaigns. The message is that by taking drugs you lose everything

else in your life. Your family, friends, hobbies and work is pushed aside by the constant want and need for drugs (“Anti-Drugs – Dummy”).

Renton does not realize or does not want to realize why he relies so heavily on drugs. This is clear to the reader when Renton has to see a psychiatrist as a part of a deal he strikes with the judge. He cannot be truthful and honest with the psychiatrist and deflects the psychiatrist’s questions. Renton has decided to choose drugs over consumerism and tells the doctor that he has decided to reject the values that society is trying to impose upon him. The psychiatrist believes there is a link between Renton’s brother dying and the fact that he relies so heavily on heroin to get by. Renton says to himself and the doctor that he cannot see any connection between those two things (Kirklin and Richardson 130-131). Renton is a junkie that cannot be helped because he does not want help and by excluding himself from society Renton is doing exactly what is described in the government’s message about the life of drug addicts, i.e. that drug addicts do not pull their weight in society and are a liability on the country (Brown 20-21).

At the end of *Trainspotting* Renton betrays those who have been closest to him. He steals their money and leaves them with nothing but despair. Renton knows that stealing the money means that he can never return home but that thought does not worry him (Welsh 430). In doing so Renton shows how in the world of drugs every man has to fight for himself and his lack of worries over his future show how disconnected he is to society. He does not care that he is leaving everybody he knows and again Renton proves the notion that there are no friends in the business of drugs, only associates (Welsh 7).

#### **4.2 Other characters**

There are many more minor characters in *Trainspotting* that have different relationships with different drugs. These characters like the main characters are dealing with problems that can be mostly linked to their substance use. These minor characters are addicted to many different drugs such as cocaine, amphetamine, marijuana and alcohol, which all play a part in the novel, although heroin overshadows those drugs most of the time. These smaller characters take us from the absolute highs down to the absolute lows of drug use.

An example of the highs of drug use is when Renton and Simon visit a drug dealer at the start of *Trainspotting* and meet a girl named Ali. Simon helps her to take a hit of heroin and as he injects her she states: “That beats any meat injection...that beats any fuckin cock in the world” (Welsh 10). Her tone has shifted however by the end of the novel. When she and Renton and the others are at their friend’s Matty’s funeral she vows to be clean from now on.



Matty himself had been an addict for a long time and had contracted HIV and died because of it (Welsh 362). Prior to Matty's death his girlfriend had left him and taken their daughter away from him and she had forbidden Matty to visit his own daughter because of his addiction (Welsh 358). Matty's life is comparable to a TV ad in the "Heroin screws you up" campaign where a couple is out partying and the man is on heroin and trying to get his girlfriend to try it but by the end of the ad his girlfriend has left him and he has become sick and his home is a mess ("Heroin Screws You Up").

Simon "Sick Boy" Williamson is the second biggest character in *Trainspotting* behind Mark Renton. Simon believes himself to be the smartest person he knows. He seems to be able to quit drugs more easily than the story's other characters. He thinks that his friends are limited and believes himself to be destined for better and bigger things than his associates although he does not prove that throughout the novel. Simon has no faith in modern society and states: "It's me, me, Simon David Williamson, NUMERO FUCKING UNO, versus the world" (Welsh 38). Simon thinks that his friends are hopeless addicts that are dragging him down. However, by doing drugs as well as being around other drug addicts he is risking his life in the government's view because of the links between peer pressure and doing drugs (The Museum of Drugs).

In the beginning of *Trainspotting* Simon is going through withdrawal and his ever growing symptoms are described to the reader by Renton. Simon is sweating, trembling, his eyes are bulging and he is breathing heavily (Welsh 3-4). Even though Simon is in a horrible state when they arrive at the drug dealer he is still smart enough to deny the drug dealer when he says that Simon has to use a needle that someone else had used before. Simon is aware of the threat of HIV and does not want to take a chance (Welsh 11). Then when his baby dies he reacts in a different way than Lesley, the baby's mother. She instantly wants a hit of heroin to take her away from the reality of the situation while Simon states: "Ah'm never touchin that shite again. Ah'm fuckin clean fae now oan" (Welsh 70). His reaction fits the notion that he is not consumed by the need for heroin like some of the other characters in *Trainspotting*. He does however use heroin again and in doing so strengthens the government's anti-drug message that when the drugs have a hold on someone they do not let go easily ("Heroin Screws You Up").

Ironically, the most dangerous addict in *Trainspotting* is not a heroin addict. The raging alcoholic, Begbie, is extremely ill tempered and is always looking for trouble. He is drunk most of the time and does not see any problem with it. He looks down on drugs and believes them to be poison (Byrne 174). Renton and Begbie meet a homeless drunk in the old

desolate Leith Central Station. As it turns out this drunk is Begbie's father and it puts Begbie's behaviour into perspective (Schoene 65). His friends cannot really relax in Begbie's company, especially if he has been drinking, since they have to be careful in his presence so that they do not anger him because then there is no turning back (Welsh 97). Begbie is a hopeless, violent drunk and his life is in ruins. His father is a homeless drunk and Begbie seems unable to change his ways and is going down the same path that his father has gone.

Spud is the most naive character in *Trainspotting*. He is innocent and easy to influence. Renton regards Spud as a classic acid head because of the way he keeps making remarks that are not relevant to the subject that is being discussed at any given time (Welsh 9). Spud, due to his innocent nature, does not really belong with the group that he is in but the other characters nevertheless feel protective of him. Renton describes Spud's smile by saying "it would make old wifies in the street want to adopt him like a stray cat" (Welsh 170). Spud like Renton is unemployed and receives governmental benefits. They attend job interviews that they are required to do in order to keep their benefits. They use amphetamine prior to an interview to intentionally come across as bad candidates for the job in question (Welsh 85-86). At one point in *Trainspotting* Spud cannot go to a football match with his friends because he is on a heroin binge at home (Welsh 63). This shows how drugs cause addicts to lose their connection to society because of their addiction. At another point in *Trainspotting* Spud is sentenced to jail because he and Renton were caught stealing. Renton is much smarter than Spud and is able to talk himself out of a jail sentence while Spud is not smart enough to do so (Welsh 208). Spud is the government's proof that if you pick the wrong kind of friends you will end up in trouble. He is so easily influenced that he becomes a heroin addict like his friends.

Even though Spud is a heroin addict for the most part of the novel he knows that doing drugs only has downsides. At a point in *Trainspotting* Spud and Renton are both off heroin. Renton is tired of how complicated he feels that their lives are and argues that they should start heroin again to simplify their lives. Spud, who usually does not stand up against his friends, puts forward a convincing argument for staying clean:

Yeah, but it is a fuckin miserable life, likesay man. It's nae life at aw, ken? Likesay whin yir sick man... that is the fuckin lowest ay the low... the grindin bones... the poison man, the pure poison...Dinnae tell us ye want aw that again, cause that's likesay, fuckin bullshit (Welsh 169-170).

These eye opening words by Spud are almost identical to the anti-heroin campaign which states on one of its posters “When life doesn’t seem that great, heroin might seem a great way to have a few laughs. But it isn’t long before the fun turns into a bad joke. You’ll start looking ill, losing weight and feeling like death” (Museum of Drugs).

When Spud manages to quit heroin for a while he has the same experience that Renton has while off drugs. Drugs take up all his time and thoughts when he is doing them but his interests and social life broadens when he keeps away from them. Spud starts to show interest in his family and what is happening in sports and in society albeit he is sometimes not smart enough to understand what is going on. Spud visits his grandmother which he has not seen for a long time (Welsh 157) and meets his uncle and is present when his uncle is the victim of racism because he is of mixed races (Welsh 162). All of these things are something that Spud is not interested in when he is taking drugs. Unlike Renton however, who moves away for a period of time and is somewhat successful in a real estate job, Spud is not smart enough or strong-willed enough to find a job and something to do with his life. He starts to feel lonely and cannot handle life off drugs. Spud, good-willed as he is, is unable to quit heroin for good just like many other characters in *Trainspotting*. His lack of success in staying off heroin is what the government’s anti-heroin campaign is all about. If you let drugs get a hold of you they will not let go (“Anti-Drugs – Dummy”).

## 5. Conclusion

With the publication of *Trainspotting*, Irvine Welsh influenced a lot of people in Scotland and in the UK as a whole. He wrote from a perspective that had not really been used before by employing the view point of a young drug addict who has nothing going for him. Welsh opened the discussion about drug use among the neglected youth of the mid 1980s, who had not received enough attention and opportunities from the British government. Welsh uses his own experiences and those of his friends in real life to make *Trainspotting* believable and not too exaggerated. The drug use of Renton and the other characters is in accordance with what was happening on the British drug scene in the late 1980s and early 1990s. These characters' heroin use and use of other substances fits the research that has been conducted concerning the drug use of the British youth in this time period. In *Trainspotting* Welsh manages to show both the pros and cons of drug use. He does not take sides but rather is honest about the consequences of drug use regardless of whether those consequences are positive or negative.

The reader is introduced to a group of addicts that have nothing going for them. Their misfortunes can be linked to their uncontrollable addiction. They are unemployed, have no contact or minimal contact with their families and have no one in their lives that means something to them. The characters have made the wrong choices in life and are now paying the price. At the end of the story the heroin addicts Simon and Spud are left with nothing as well as the alcoholic Begbie. They have no education, work or money so their future does not look bright. Renton has gone to Amsterdam where he will no doubt have troubles himself due to his history of drug use. Since he began using drugs he has never been able to quit drugs for long and there is no reason to think that this will change now. Renton tries to escape from his home and his friends who he believes to be the root of all his problems, when in reality the problem has lain within himself all along. Renton, however, is not willing to accept that.

The British government has introduced a lot of campaigns and new laws in its effort to fight against the use of different drugs. Early in the 20<sup>th</sup> century the government focused on passing laws that made drugs less accessible. This made sense in that time period because drugs were hard to come by unless they were prescribed by doctors. With advances in shipping and technology the government had to try different approaches in its fight against drug use. The government started to introduce anti-drug campaigns, most of which had the message that drugs were dangerous and would probably kill those who would dare to try them. This kind of scare tactics had limited success. These campaigns have all had the same goal of decreasing the number of drug addicts in the UK. Some campaigns and laws have been successful while others have not shown the same results. The campaigns that the British

government has run against heroin use represent similar problems and consequences as the heroin use portrayed in *Trainspotting*. The British government could use the main characters in Irvine Welsh's novel *Trainspotting* as prime examples of why the country's citizens should never try heroin.

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